RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH HEROINES OF THE VICTORIAN AGE A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMALE PSYCHOLOGY AND TRAGIC FATE IN THE DRAMA OF A. N. OSTROVSKY AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

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Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative-typological study of female characters in the dramatic work of Alexander Nikolaevich Ostrovsky and in the English Victorian novel, focusing on the psychology of the heroine and the artistic mechanisms through which her tragic fate is constructed. Two of Ostrovsky’s central heroines - Katerina in The Storm (1859) and Larisa in The Dowryless Girl (1878) - are examined alongside English counterparts whose destinies share comparable contours: Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Tess in Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles (1891), with reference to Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847). The study identifies a recurrent structural pattern across both traditions, whereby a sensitive and morally independent woman is constrained by a patriarchal and increasingly commercial social order, experiences an irreconcilable conflict between inner feeling and external norm, and is ultimately destroyed. At the same time, the analysis reveals significant divergences determined by genre, national-cultural context, and authorial worldview. The article argues that these heroines serve as focal points for each writer’s critique of the social commodification of women, while their differing modes of death - self-willed in the Russian texts, socially inflicted in the English ones - mark a meaningful distinction in the conception of female agency.

Keywords: *comparative literature, Ostrovsky, Victorian novel, female psychology, tragic heroine, fallen woman, The Storm, The Dowryless Girl, gender, nineteenth-century literature.*

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century, in both Russia and Britain, was marked by an intensifying public debate over the social position, moral status, and inner life of women - the cluster of concerns that English writers came to call “the woman question.” In Britain this period coincides with the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), whose name designates a culture organized around an exacting ideal of domestic femininity, famously crystallized in Coventry Patmore’s poem The Angel in the House [13]. The same ideal was subjected to sustained intellectual pressure, most influentially in John Stuart Mill’s treatise on the legal and moral subordination of women [9], and was steadily eroded in the realist fiction of the period [14].

In Russia, the same decades saw the maturing of a realist literature acutely concerned with the fate of the individual within a rigidly hierarchical society. The dramatic career of Alexander Nikolaevich Ostrovsky (1823-1886), whose major plays appeared between the late 1840s and the 1880s, falls precisely within this Victorian span [10; 17]. This chronological coincidence makes a comparison between his heroines and those of the contemporaneous English novel both apposite and critically illuminating, for the two literatures responded, through different national experiences and different genres, to a shared historical pressure on the figure of the woman.

Despite an extensive body of scholarship devoted to Ostrovsky’s heroines within Russian criticism [3; 8; 15; 20] and a correspondingly rich feminist re-reading of the Victorian heroine within Anglophone scholarship [1; 5; 16], the two traditions have rarely been brought into sustained comparative dialogue. Existing studies tend to treat each national canon in isolation, leaving the typological relationship between the Russian tragic heroine of the stage and the English tragic heroine of the novel largely unexamined. The present article addresses this gap.

The aim of the study is to conduct a comparative-typological analysis of the psychology and tragic fate of the central heroines in Ostrovsky’s drama and in the English Victorian novel, in order to establish both the typological convergences that link them and the culturally and generically determined divergences that separate them. The working hypothesis is that, beneath evident differences of national milieu and literary form, the heroines of the two traditions are constructed according to a comparable tragic model, in which a woman’s heightened moral and emotional sensibility comes into fatal conflict with a society that regards her as property.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary material of the study comprises two plays by Ostrovsky - The Storm [11] and The Dowryless Girl [12] - set against three works of English Victorian prose fiction: Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss [4], Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles [6], and, as a contrastive reference point, Brontë’s Jane Eyre [2]. These texts were selected because their heroines occupy structurally analogous positions: each is a woman of unusual inner depth whose desire or moral will is incompatible with the expectations of her community, and whose story moves toward death or near-destruction.

The principal method is comparative-typological, supplemented by historical-cultural contextualization and by close textual analysis of character and situation. The interpretation draws on two complementary scholarly frameworks. The first is Anglo-American feminist literary criticism, in particular Showalter’s account of a distinct female literary tradition [16] and Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of the polarized images of “angel” and “monster” through which the nineteenth century imagined women [5], together with Auerbach’s study of the Victorian mythologization of the female figure [1]. The second is the established Russian critical tradition on Ostrovsky, from Dobrolyubov’s foundational reading of The Storm [3] to the modern scholarship of Revyakin [15], Lakshin [8], and Zhuravlyova and Makeev [20]. The comparison is organized around three analytical categories: the social mechanism of constraint, the interior psychology of the heroine, and the structure of the tragic outcome.

RESULTS

In all the texts examined, the heroine is positioned within a social order that treats her primarily as an object of exchange. In The Dowryless Girl the motif is explicit: Larisa Ogudalova, a beautiful but portionless girl, is courted, wagered over, and finally treated as a luxury possession by the merchants and gentlemen around her, until she herself articulates the recognition that she has been regarded not as a person but as a thing [12]. Russian criticism has long read the play as Ostrovsky’s indictment of the new commercial order, in which human worth is recalculated in monetary terms [15; 20]. In The Storm the constraint is patriarchal rather than overtly commercial: Katerina is

enclosed within the merchant household of the Kabanovs and subjected to the tyranny of her mother-in-law, the domestic despot whom Dobrolyubov took as the emblem of the “dark kingdom” [3; 11].

The English novels translate the same logic into the idioms of provincial and rural England. Maggie Tulliver is bound by the narrow proprieties of St Ogg‘s, where a woman’s reputation is a form of social capital and a single compromising episode is sufficient to ruin her [4; 19]. Tess is more brutally commodified still: she is sent to “claim kin” with the wealthy d’Urbervilles, sexually exploited by Alec, and thereafter judged by the very standard of purity that her violation has supposedly destroyed [6; 7]. Across both literatures, then, the heroine’s tragedy originates not in a private flaw but in a social system that assigns her value as property and punishes any assertion of autonomous selfhood [1; 14].

The heroines are further linked by a distinctive interior structure: each possesses an intense capacity for feeling combined with an exacting moral conscience, and the tragedy unfolds in the space between them. Katerina is governed by a religious conscience so acute that, having yielded to her love for Boris, she is unable to live with the concealment and confesses publicly; her psychology is one of moral absolutism, in which sincerity is incompatible with survival [3; 11]. Larisa, by contrast, is destroyed less by guilt than by the collapse of her illusions: her tragedy is that of a sensitive nature that longs for genuine love in a world that can offer her only possession [12; 8].

The English heroines display a comparable doubling of passion and conscience, rendered with the psychological amplitude available to the novel form. Maggie Tulliver is torn between the claims of feeling and the claims of duty to her family and community, and her renunciation of Stephen Guest is an act of conscience that nonetheless fails to save her reputation [4; 18]. Tess is characterized by a moral purity that the narrative insists upon even as society denies it, so that her psychology becomes the site of a sustained protest against the discrepancy between conventional and authentic morality [6; 7]. In the contrastive case of Jane Eyre, the same conflict between passion and principle is resolved without catastrophe, which throws into relief how narrowly the tragic heroines are denied any comparable settlement [2; 5].

The decisive divergence between the two traditions emerges in the mechanism of the tragic ending. In Ostrovsky’s plays the heroine’s death is, in a significant sense, self-determined: Katerina throws herself into the Volga, and Larisa, mortally wounded by Karandyshev, receives death almost as a release and shields her killer with her final words [11; 12]. The act of dying becomes the heroine’s last assertion of will against a world that has denied her any other [3; 8]. In the English novels the destruction is more nearly imposed from without: Maggie drowns in a flood, an event that fuses natural catastrophe with social entrapment [4; 19], while Tess is executed by the machinery of the law after a violence that the narrative frames as the culmination of her victimization [6]. The Russian heroine tends to seize her fate; the English heroine tends to be overtaken by it. The comparison is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Comparative model of the tragic heroine

Parameter	Ostrovsky (Russian drama)	Victorian novel (English)
Social mechanism	Merchant patriarchy and the commodification of the dowryless woman	Provincial reputation and rural class exploitation
Core conflict	Sincere feeling versus religious-moral conscience or social possession	Authentic morality versus conventional respectability
Mode of death	Self-willed: suicide (Katerina); death accepted as release (Larisa)	Socially inflicted: flood (Maggie); execution (Tess)
Authorial stance	The death as protest and last assertion of will	The death as indictment of social and moral hypocrisy

DISCUSSION

The convergences identified above suggest that the tragic heroine of the mid- to late nineteenth century constitutes a genuinely transnational literary type, generated by a shared historical situation rather than by direct influence. In both Russia and Britain, an older patriarchal order was being overlaid by a commercial economy that intensified the treatment of women as objects of value, and in both literatures the most sensitive women became the figures through whom this contradiction was dramatized [1; 14]. The recurrence of the death-by-water motif - Katerina in the Volga, Maggie in the Floss - is especially striking, functioning in each case as an image of a purity that society can neither accommodate nor permit to survive.

The divergences are equally instructive and are best explained by the interaction of genre and worldview. The concentrated form of drama disposes Ostrovsky toward a heroine who acts decisively at a single tragic climax, whereas the expansive form of the novel allows Eliot and Hardy to trace a gradual social destruction across a whole life [16; 19]. This formal difference reinforces a difference of emphasis: where Dobrolyubov read Katerina’s suicide as a flash of light within the darkness, an affirmation of the human spirit’s refusal of bondage [3], the English novelists tend to locate the tragic meaning less in the heroine’s act than in the society that condemns her, so that the narrative voice itself becomes an instrument of social criticism [6; 18]. The contrast between a self-willed and a socially inflicted death thus reflects two related but distinct conceptions of female agency - the one tragic-heroic, the other tragic-victimary.

These findings refine rather than overturn the dominant readings within each national tradition. They confirm the Russian critical emphasis on Ostrovsky’s social critique [8; 15; 20] and the feminist account of the Victorian heroine as caught between the polarized roles of angel and fallen woman [5; 16], while demonstrating that the two bodies of scholarship illuminate a common European phenomenon when read together. The comparison also clarifies the function of the non-tragic exception: the survival and

qualified triumph of Jane Eyre measures precisely what the tragic heroines are denied, namely a social space in which feeling and conscience might be reconciled [2].

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the heroines of Ostrovsky’s drama and of the English Victorian novel are constructed according to a shared tragic model, in which a woman of exceptional moral and emotional sensibility is destroyed by a social order that values her as property. Within this common pattern, two culturally and generically determined variants emerge: the Russian heroine, shaped by the concentrated form of drama and by Ostrovsky’s critique of merchant patriarchy, tends to claim her fate through a self-willed death that reads as protest, whereas the English heroine, shaped by the amplitude of the novel and by the social criticism of Eliot and Hardy, tends to be overtaken by a destruction imposed from without. The heroine thus functions, in both literatures, as the central instrument of a critique of the commodification of women, and the comparative perspective reveals the nineteenth-century tragic heroine to be a European type whose national realizations are best understood in relation to one another. Further research might extend the comparison to Ostrovsky’s relation to English dramatic treatments of the same theme, and to the wider European context of the “fallen woman” in realist literature.

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